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ABSTRACT

Following the lead of James Berlin, the trend in rhetoric and composition for the past two decades has been to develop pedagogies that not only affirm the social construction of knowledge, but also interrogate the ideological structures of power in which students are always and already embedded. Since Berlin and others of the "political turn" in the field conceptualized the practice, social epistemic rhetoric has become the driving force in theory and pedagogy. Social epistemic rhetoric moves composition out of the realm of both the current-traditional course as well as the "process" course based on writing as self expression. Through it, students would gain not only literacy skills, but more importantly literate "power." Social epistemic rhetoric connects cultural studies and composition; in fact, cultural studies has helped in the discipline's legitimization process. This paper redescribes how cultural studies and composition can work together post-critically. The paper points out that, despite the popularity of social epistemic practices, many advocates have recently expressed frustration over students' resistance not to the dominant culture in which they live, but to critical pedagogy itself and to critical teachers themselves. It also notes that in the wake of this resistance, articles and books reflecting on the discipline, and especially individual practices, have flooded recent rhetoric and composition publications. The paper considers what is the "object" of post-criticism and concentrates on explaining it, working from Gregory Ulmer, Giorgio Agamben, Roland Barthes, and Diane Davis. (Contains 23 references.) (NKA)

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Resistance, Responsibility, or Whatever: The "Work" of a Post-Critical Pedagogy

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To begin his last book, *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, James Berlin tells us: "English Studies is in crisis. Virtually no feature of the discipline can be considered beyond dispute" (1). For Berlin, the "crisis" centers around what represents the distinct object of study, or content, in the field of Rhetoric and Composition. Many others in the field have worked extensively with this question as well. Maps drawn by, for example, Richard Fulkerson, Sharon Crowley, John Trimbur, and Stephen North have served as representative guides of what stands for, at different times, the object of study in Rhetoric and Composition. Following Berlin's lead, the trend for the past two decades has been to develop pedagogies that not only affirm the social construction of knowledge, but also interrogate the ideological structures of power in which students are always and already embedded. Since Berlin and others of the "political turn" in rhetoric and composition conceptualized the practice, social epistemic rhetoric has become the driving force in theory and pedagogy. Social epistemic rhetoric moves composition out of the realm of both the current-traditional course as well as the "process" course based on writing as self-expression. Through it, students would gain not only literacy skills but, and more importantly, literate *power*. This empowerment could not be achieved if writing is viewed as self-expression. Accordingly, one of Berlin's main claims is that, because language does not represent, but rather, constitutes reality, writing teachers are teaching a version of reality that "causes reverberations in *all* features of a student's private and social behavior" (*Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures* 92; my emphasis.) The basic assumption is that since nearly all students are required to take first year composition, this course should equip them with more than just literacy *skills;* instead, students

should become aware that they are controlled by "dominant cultural forces" and structures of power in the democratic society in which they live. Presumably, this new awareness will make them active, critical citizens in a participatory democracy. In putting forth these claims, Berlin made the writing classroom the primary site in the ongoing struggle for change within English Departments, the university, and society at large.

Along with Berlin, and as early as 1982, other scholars in the profession began appropriating Paulo Friere's ideas for a revolutionary literacy program. It was and still is believed that teachers should help students understand the connections between their own lives and society, and empower them to use writing to *control* their environment (see especially Fiore and Elasser). Hence, students learn to critique the world around them by: first, naming the dominant social forces that control their lives; next, reflecting on how these forces control them; and ultimately gaining new social awareness by resisting and grasping control over these forces. Resistance, reflecting (on), and assuming the role of a rational subject who, through the process of critique, can "remake experience" will allow students to transfer their newfound subjectivity to other areas of their lives. Recently advocating this practice, Berlin's former students still strongly believe that we "should use our cultural studies composition classes to empower students – [if we do] – we may well begin to give them the tools to write a better, a more equitable, compassionate society" (Sidler and Morris "Writing in a Post-Berlinian Landscape" 290).

Social-epistemic rhetoric connects cultural studies and composition; in fact, cultural studies (both British and American) has helped in the discipline's legitimization process. Apparently, as John Trimbur points out in 1994 in "The Politics of Radical Pedagogy," the politics called for in a radical pedagogy are *self-evident*; the consciousness raising efforts of

radical composition teachers are the driving force of composition pedagogy. In other words, raising students' social awareness by advocating collective social change is something *unquestionable* that we do. Despite the overwhelming and extensive popularity of social epistemic practices, however, many advocates have recently expressed frustration over students' resistance ***not*** *to the dominant culture in which they live*, but to *critical pedagogy itself* and to critical teachers themselves (see for example Virginia Anderson, Berlin, Dale Bauer, Crowley, John Clifford and Elizabeth Ervin, Elizabeth Flynn, John Trimbur). Students are not willing and not able to step out of their own situatedness: they neither see nor examine their ideological biases, which are often in conflict with presumed consciousness raising efforts by composition teachers. Thus, relieving students of their unfounded assumptions does not make them change these assumptions, it only produces resistance because they are not able to "see" that their false assumptions are indeed false.

In the wake of this resistance, articles and books reflecting on the discipline and especially individual practices have flooded recent rhetoric and composition publications. In a review essay on such publications, Geoffrey Sirc provides a scathing critique, which questions the necessity of such abundant reflections. He notices that most of the people writing reflective stories still claim to "use their practice as a vehicle for social change" (521), and points out two things missing from the narratives: stories of former students from social-epistemic classes who have used what they learned in composition outside of the university setting, and stories from people like himself who feel the profession has not developed very well. I wonder along with Sirc: are these "results" and student success stories necessary to concretely legitimize social-epistemic practices? Or, might social-epistemic practices themselves be the very thing that elicits negative resistance from students? I, too, have experienced resistance from students who would

rather not critique the dominant social forces in their lives. As Marshall Alcorn and Peter Sloterdijk ("Changing the Subject in Postmodernist Theory" and *Critique of Cynical Reason*) have told us, people stick to their positions for anything but rational reasons. By employing the method of critique through distanced reflection, critical pedagogues assume that reason alone will guide emancipation from dominant, oppressive forces in control. A major conflict occurs, however, when students see and understand their "mystified" attachment to ideology in perfectly rational terms; this produces "enlightened false consciousness." Hence, they neither see nor engage with the point of cultural critique, which in turn (re)emphasizes and reinforces their cynical, "mystified," and so-called indifferent subject status.

Hence, just as process theory has recently been challenged by those who would move toward post-process (see Kent), so should we challenge the other "given" in our conversations: cultural studies and composition as it is currently practiced. Consequently, instead of coming up with solutions to curtail this resistance from *within* the conceptual model currently in practice, or reflecting on my own practices, I turn to a fundamentally different way of thinking about cultural studies and composition. This is crucial, since previous efforts have remained within the very model they have aimed to critique. What hasn't been challenged is the literate apparatus itself; in other words, as the "space" of writing changes, moving writing within the electronic medium, so will the thinking and writing that gets generated in and through it. Hence, I will redescribe how cultural studies and composition can work post-critically; *post-criticism* is practiced by critiquing the object in its own medium, which eliminates the critical distance between subject and object. The post-critic performs his or her theory in an electronic environment, which allows theory and practice to fold together. Post-criticism does what it says.

What is the "Object" of Post-Criticism

Also over the past two decades, alongside the growing popularity of social-epistemic practices, Gregory Ulmer has been developing a cultural studies pedagogy that responds to electronic literacy. In the eighties, he conceived of a project to televise Derridean theory, in the nineties he developed the concept of electracy and the methodology of *chorography*, and now he is working to bridge the work we do in the humanities with state and community related projects. However, rhetoric and composition have not appropriated his body of cultural studies work, since its method is not rational and relies on analogy and chance. One aspect of Ulmer's work that is frequently overlooked or merely dismissed is his "showing" of the theory that he discusses. This usually occurs after Ulmer explains the theory in traditional academic prose: prose in which most of us are highly trained to read. However, many are neither trained nor willing to read the "showing" part of Ulmer's work, which does not present itself as an academic argument. This "showing," is "critiquing the object in its own medium," which erases any critical distance that may have been assumed. Critiquing the object in its own medium, Ulmer tells us, takes the emphasis off the teacher; he insists that the medium itself teaches. Thus, Ulmer suggests in almost all of his work that each practitioner must experience his/her own "showing"; or, the theory Ulmer describes *must* be folded into practice by each person who reads his work. This practice allows people to write and reason with all the discourses in their lives simultaneously. While I do not have the equipment here to show how I have practiced post-criticism, I invite you to visit a website where I have posted a video along with another version of this paper http://www.uta.edu/english/V/digital/sarah.html. There you will see traditional criticism and post-criticism simultaneously: the paper I am reading now is written in traditional academic prose and the video that plays on the website performs for me the theory that I explain.

"Doing" or "performing" the theory of post-criticism has brought the practice to life for me, just as Ulmer has suggested. My video is on a loop, therefore, as it repeats, perhaps you will notice particular juxtapositions as they are explained in the essay that resides alongside them. Through post-criticism, I attempt to show why I believe the combination of cultural studies and composition must be rethought and reworked: not reflected *on* in order to change, but reflected *in* in order to always already change.

Since I am not able to perform this theory in the manner of post-criticism, I will spend the rest of this presentation attempting to explain it. I will work mostly out of Ulmer, Giorgio Agamben, Roland Barthes, and Diane Davis. All of these theorists are searching for subject positions residing outside traditional notions of literacy and academic writing: something that will open up the present way of doing things into something wholly different.

For Ulmer, just like others I have mentioned, the issue is representing the object of study. But a crucial difference is that the object is not separated from the "subject" critiquing it: the embedded material of both subject and object are stitched together, there is no differentiation. That is to say, the object of study can no longer be "looked at" from a critical distance, even if the objects of study are the cultural codes that dominate our lives. Ulmer's benchmark essay, "The Object of Post-Criticism," describes critiquing the object in its own medium: since a critical distance can no longer be assumed, "the principal device taken over by critics and theorists, then, is the compositional pair of collage/montage." Collage/montage takes over cause and effect logic and better suits the cut and paste function of electronic literacy. Ulmer notes the principles of collage/montage that are important to writing and criticism: *decoupage* (or severing, cutting) and *assemblage* (montage). Cutting "breaks up" oppressive structures and releases forces and intensities previously stifled and plugged up. This procedure is carried out by

associational logic: writing without representation, without the distance to look *at*, reflect, and change as in critical pedagogy as we currently know it. Ulmer reminds us that montage is not to reflect but to *change* reality, which is different from Berlin's way of using writing to change reality.

Circling back to Berlin, we can see a crucial difference between critical pedagogy and that which Ulmer advocates: Berlin remains within what Ulmer calls the literate apparatus. Ulmer borrows the theory of the "apparatus" from media studies, which is: the matrix of a language machine, partly social and partly technological that operates in a given epoch. An apparatus is not only a technology (such as paper, etc.), but also an institution and its practices developed along with the technology. The literate apparatus figures everything in terms of analysis by breaking wholes into components, and these components operate as if they are autonomous. The apparatus of literacy from Plato through Descartes to the present relies on the method of analysis and synthesis: analysis and synthesis make something intelligible and treat the world in terms of elements. For Berlin, once we see and analyze the contradictions in our world, *we will want to change that world* and we would act in our own best interests; our analysis will make visible previously hidden conditions of oppression. A difficulty with this method arises, however, since many problems are holistic or emergent: existing in the tangle of reality but then becoming invisible when reduced to mere parts. Hence, like Derrida and Kristeva before him, Ulmer turns to Plato's *Timeaus* and the excluded third kind of being, the chora, to invent a methodology applicable to the emerging electronic apparatus. Chora lies between being and becoming and therefore cannot be conceptualized in order to become an object. Using the chora, Ulmer attempts to capture intuition, chance, and pictographic representations. Unlike a literate, heuristic method, wherein there is a set of procedures to follow

to produce varying outcomes, Ulmer's aleatory method attempts to grasp that which cannot be articulated in language; he is interested in what doesn't yet exist. This is realized through the "methodology" (the impossible possibility of a postmodern method) of chorography: a way of gathering dispersed information into an unstable set held together by a pattern. Chorography does not offer a set of pre-established procedures; it creates a network in which to "catch" and "hear" an invention remembered by the body and takes writing outside of literate method. Knowledge generated in the chora cannot be apprehended by reason; it must be *grasped*, because it cannot be conceived and it cannot be perceived. EV Walter, another theorist who returns to the chora, emphasizes that knowledge generated there is neither in the rules of rational thought nor a product of sensory experience, but something else: a curious, spurious mode of grasping reality. Hence, writing becomes the very way to bring what the body knows intuitively into awareness.

Like Berlin, Ulmer believes that both "what's there" and "what's not there" shapes a person, and it is the job of chorography to provide the space for continuous generation of discovering exactly what that might be. The difference lies precisely *when* "what's there" becomes known. For Berlin and social-epistemic rhetoric, it's when the subject critically "reads" his or her world and *sees* the contradictions present. For Ulmer, it is *after* something is *felt* by the body and caught in the chora through a network of associations. Ulmer affirms what the body might "know," instead of casting memories and knowledge in the body as simply irrational feelings that any rational person would dismiss as irrelevant to academic writing.

Although the chora is difficult to grasp and interpret, Ulmer's description of it allows us to see how invention might occur in not the literate apparatus, but, as Ulmer has named it, the *electrate apparatus*. Electracy is the neologism Ulmer invents for writing in an electronic

environment; its crucial aspect is that information in electracy is organized fundamentally by the *image*, which exists outside the realm of rational analysis. Electracy is not "media literacy," which is a movement that still formulates the present moment in terms of literacy and wants to make citizens more critical of what they consume in the media. In electracy, one does not critique media; one uses media to perform critique.

I now turn to Agamben, for he provides a description of a figure that is best suited for electracy: the whatever singularity. This radical singularity remains in a state of constant becoming; Agamben tells us that the whatever singularity has no identity; whatever is not determinate with respect to a concept, but neither is it simply indeterminate; rather, it is determined only through its relation to an *idea*, that is, to the totality of its possibilities. Or, as Diane Davis puts it, "the potential to be exposed (finitude). Ulmer explains *whatever* like this: "What 'meaning' is to words, 'whatever' is to photographs . . . Agamben does not 'define' Whatever . . . but he gives nineteen metaphors or analogies" (*Beehive Interview*).

Whatever cannot be articulated, but it can be "shown" and felt through images. Agamben tells us that "to grasp whateverness one needs a photographic lens" (*The Coming Community* 49). Hence, whatever does not explain or argue, but remains in the order of making, producing, and continuous generation . Roland Barthes deals with this as well when he captures Eisenstein's stills in his essay "The Third Meaning": Barthes writes, "the third meaning carries a certain emotion . . . [it] is not in the language system (even that of symbols). Take away the third meaning and communication and signification still remain" (58; 59). The third meaning can only be felt: it can only produce a mood. It can only me *made*. The mood, when felt, then links elsewhere. One *feels* the same mood in other situations, associates that feeling, and links accordingly. Hence, dominant ideologies will continually be resisted by affirming the intensities

that reappear through the chora and then reassembling these intensities into new combinations, which were previously left unarticulated by dominant discourses. Whatever resistance, however, is resistance without being reactionary. It is not reflection from a distance in order to act and subsequently change; the discourse of resistance (within which the whatever dwells) is not composed as a metalanguage but performed as a text itself. With metalanguage sterilized, "telling about" something is impossible, it *must* be felt and shown as the "impossible possibility" of writing without representation.

"We are as though held, arrested before something, but this being arrested is also a being-outside, an ek-stasis in a more original dimension" (*Agamben* Man Without Content *99*).

Agamben's discussion of *The Face* is intricately intertwined with the situations described here. Agamben believes that "nature acquires a face precisely in the moment if feels that it is being revealed by language" (91). A face is given not for the purposes of appearance, but whenever something has been *ex*-posed, or has reached the level of exposition that it sinks into that very appearance. In other words, dominant discourses create faces, and plug up all possibilities for invention in the chora. The practice of giving something a name, giving it a face, separates the image from the thing, and the face becomes the site of resistance. Agamben comments on the human tendency to practice this separation, rather than viewing the face as an *opening*. This opening, this ek-stasis is precisely where the whatever resides.

Finally . . . Whatever *Grounds*? Or, Where do We Go From Here?

Ulmer's notion of chorography as a so-called method for invention in electracy is invaluable. We want to make students more politically conscious; we want them to uncover their ideological biases; yet they persistently resist. However, in electracy, this resistance is what will make cultural studies and composition work. To repeat what I said once before, Ulmer explains how Agamben attempts to present Whatever not by placing it in a genus, but by showing it

nineteen different ways. This forces viewers not to read and reflect critically, but to in turn create their own examples, thereby animating and bringing to life Whatever. Despite not being written in the realm of conceptual thinking and traditional academic prose, and despite having no apparent, direct links to pedagogy, Agamben's "Whatever being" can be seen as a response to students' resistance to critical pedagogy. The Whatever being is not part of a community but is a radical singularity in a perpetually - coming community. Agamben explains that Whatever is the *event* of an outside, an ek-stasis, a *continuous threshold*: pure exteriority. Agamben reminds us that his use of the word "outside" should express not another space that "resides beyond a determinate space," but "at the door . . . the passage, the exteriority that gives it access – in a word, it is its face" (*The Coming Community* 69). Whatever continually *shows* resistance, and this resistance, in turn, is the very means of discovery. Electracy changes thinking – that part of praxis that precedes action – to pure praxis. This praxis mounts a process in order to intervene in the world, not to reflect, but to change reality.

Ulmer presents another provocative insight into Whatever. He writes, "or, perhaps in a Whatever world, people will discover that results are not the solution but the problem" (*Beehive* Interview). In other words, searching for and demanding ends *is* the problem. We must remain "at the door" and allow our students to do so as well, for they are already doing it. The work of a post-critical pedagogy, then, will be not to "fix" resistance, but to open it up: to approach resistance by saying yes to it and allowing students to proceed by means of discovery and continuous generation. *How* they respond itself becomes indistinguishable from *why*. This is "outside" the negative mode of critique; or, as I have attempted to explain, it lies on a perpetual threshold reflecting *in*.

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